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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S CONSTITUTIONAL AND ELECTION LAW CHANGES
OPEN POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH BUT ADD HURDLES FOR
INDEPENDENTS

¶1. (SBU) Turkey's president approved a constitutional amendment on October 17 lowering the age for parliamentary candidates from 30 to 25. The move opens the door for thousands of potential new political contenders in the general elections scheduled for November 4, 2007. Parliament also revised the election law to require that all parliamentary candidates' names, including those who want to run as independents, appear on one ballot, closing a loophole that some independent candidates had used to garner votes. The changes were one of the few legislative agenda items the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Motherland Party (ANAVATAN) could agree to cooperate on with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The race is now on as Turkey's political parties maneuver to attract the sizeable youth vote and revitalize their slates of candidates.

¶2. (U) PM Erdogan welcomed the constitutional amendment and called on Turkey's youth to engage in politics. Speaking at the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Youth Assembly's October 16 iftar dinner, Erdogan proosed that "Youngsters! Enter parliament!" should be their new slogan. All young people should follow political issues and develop their own political approach in order to broaden the country's horizons, Erdogan said. Approximately 18 percent of Turkey's population -- and about one-third of its 40 million voters -- is 20 to 29 years old, based on rough 2006 figures.

¶3. (SBU) While parliament opened the door for young candidates, some argue that it has put up obstacles for the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) by annulling the right of independent candidates to use separate ballot papers. In past elections, independents have handed out separate ballots with their names that voters could submit, rather than selecting a candidate from a long ballot listing all of the parties. This has helped bolster pro-Kurdish candidates, particularly in the Southeast where literacy is low and Turkish is not the primary language, especially for women. Requiring all candidates to be listed on the same ballot may make it more difficult for DTP to gain votes (though they are unlikely in any event to meet the ten percent electoral threshold required for a party to enter parliament). Others argued that the change will in fact make it easier for independent candidates to run by eliminating the expense of printing their own ballot sheets.

¶4. (U) Parliament is pushing through proposed election legislation, including setting the November 4, 2007 election date, to meet the requirement that changes be made at least

one year before general elections are held. Setting the date is likely to put an end -- for now -- to speculation that the AKP might call early elections.

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